

PAUL POIRET, HAILED AS THE FOREMOST PERSONALITY ARTIST

Designs Gowns and Distills Perfumes with Equal Success

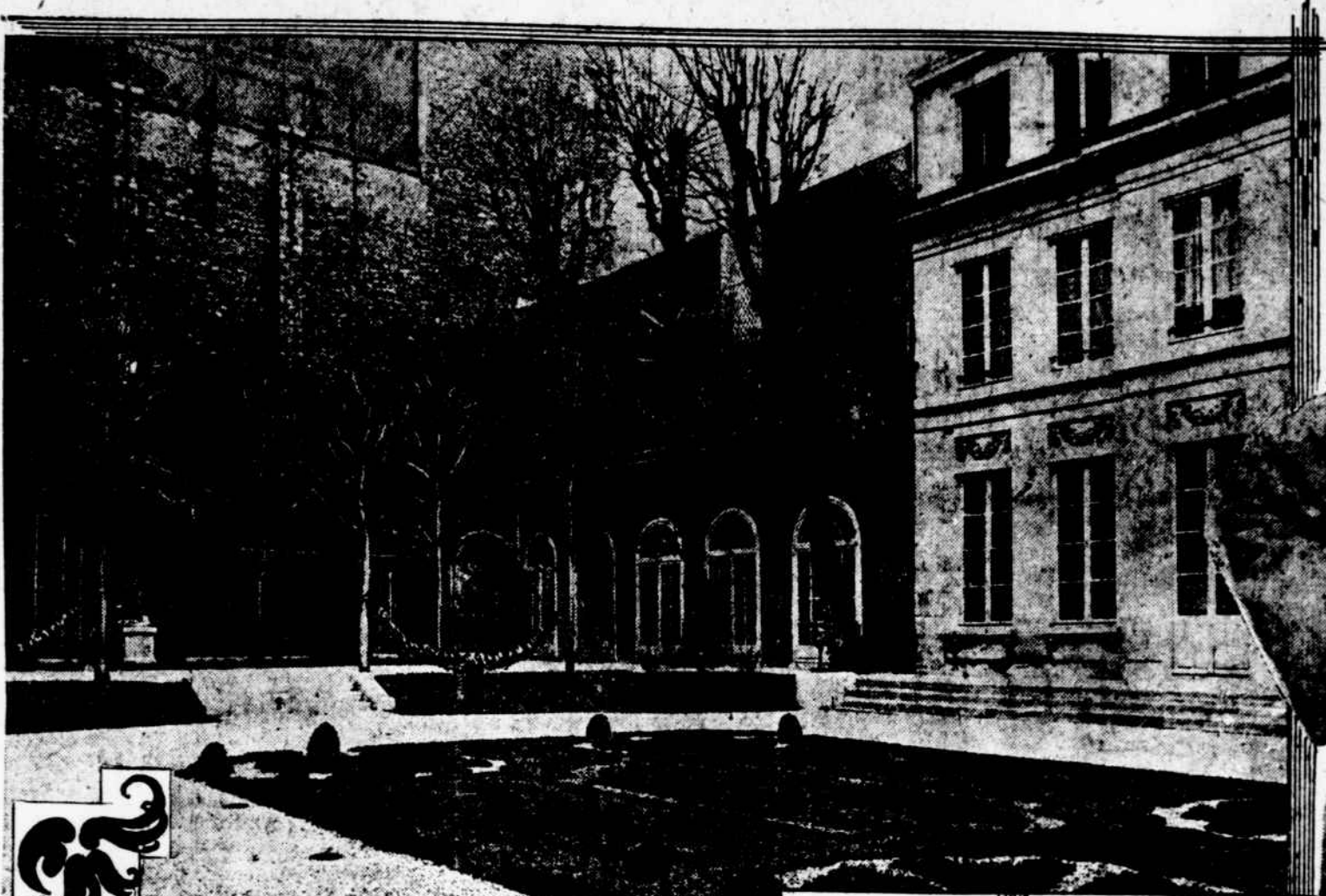
By Kate Buss

IF YOU met Paul Poiret strolling along the boulevard you would say to yourself: "There goes a successful person." And you would be so completely right in your judgment that it would not be easy to limit the meanings of the word successful. Say that he is happy; a celebrated personality; a rich man; a being of tremendous vitality; a remarkable artist; the handsome husband of a beautiful wife. Say whatever you will and add adjective and attribute and you will still not exceed the modern significance of successful as applied to Paul Poiret.

He is known to be the most chic and the most sought-out Parisian dressmaker, or couturier, which sounds a bit more masculine and which I am sure he would prefer to be named. But to call him a decorator would be more nearly to catalogue his profession. He decorates a hat or a sofa, a woman or a hotel; he distills a perfume and pours it into so beautiful a bottle that you think it more delicious than when it distracted your senses in a flower; he creates a garden, turns it into a smart "dancing" or turns the world out of it to offer a sensational evening fete to his friends; he stages a play or starts a tea-shop. And always he succeeds because he pleases your eye, because he is a decorator with an original and daring conception of color composition.

Poiret was the first modern European to popularize black; to associate somber velvet with great gold tassels; to juxtapose wide stripes of magenta and blue and toss a black flower against them to create a stunning cretonne; to rediscover the value of black marble; to revitalize color which for so long a time was the futile result of Whistler's limpid and exquisite pastels.

It is entertaining to know how Poiret es-



The Poiret gardens, facing the designer's establishment.



A handsome husband of a beautiful wife, as the accompanying picture from a painting by Garcia Benito shows. It hangs in the new salon at the Grand Palais.

ablished himself in business and to discover that his was the proverbial struggle of the young genius against paternal decision. Of course (again true to legend) he covered his schoolbooks with drawings and employed his study hours to design pretty ladies. But, college over, he was put to work with an umbrella manufacturer of family association, and sent out in the streets of Paris to deliver bundles of umbrellas.

You ask, "What did the eighteen-year-old Poiret do when his spirit met such obstruction?" He continued to make sketches of smart and original frocks, and to snatch a few moments while out to deliver his bundles of umbrellas to visit various well-known dressmakers—M. Worth, Doucet, Madame Paquin—in an attempt to sell his designs. Ultimately he succeeded in interesting M. Jacques Doucet, who engaged him at 500 francs a month to design tailor frocks, then the great mode of the feminine world. Poiret worked two years in the house of Doucet and two more for the Worth Brothers, today his business rivals, and then, to quote one of his friends, "feeling his own wings so strong that he must fly alone," he opened a tiny shop in the Rue Anjou, behind the Paris Opera House. He hung his window with fabrics of his own coloring and design, patterned with the silver of spring buds and the gold of autumn foliage that he studied in long country walks.

THERE was at that time in the Champs Elysees quarter of Paris an old "hotel" (in reality a disintegrating palace) so abandoned amid its surrounding and devastated gardens that it might have been a hundred years untenanted. It was a place of suggestion, of retreat, a background for further attack. And Paul Poiret saw and coveted it. In three months' time from the day he bought it he had the house completely restored, the gardens terraced and bedded in the "broderie" style so dear to the French landscape artist (shown in one of the photographs) and established his dress-making business on the first and second floors and himself and his wife on the third—where each remains today, although the first floor has more than once been decorated to express new ideas of Poiret, and the third floor has been embellished by three delectable youngsters, who are no less expressive of the Poiret cult of beauty.

The house and completely surrounding gardens fill a great space between the Faubourg Saint Honore and the Avenue Victor

Emmanuel III, and are near the Elysee Palace, the winter home of the French President. It is not the quarter of the dressmakers, who are rather generally grouped on the Rue de la Paix and in the Place Vendome. And the home is not at all in the manner of the others of his profession. Chez Worth you feel business in the air—that you are come to order a frock.

Chez Poiret, while fifty frocks may be offered for your inspection upon nonchalantly strolling mannequins, and while great rolls of taffetas as varied as the ocean sunset, and a wealth of brocade, lace and metal fabric, are spread for your pleasure, you linger to examine a cubist brass figure before a reflecting mirror, to approve the effect of the vari-colored pebbles arranged in garden paths with a sure eye to emphasize the pattern of the planting, to remark a white statue placed against a background of ivy-covered wall in the surrounding that best suits and shows beautiful marble, in the open air of a garden. You relax to the persuasion.

It was enlightening to watch the mannequin who displayed the cape-mantle of the true Poiret design, which appeared to be a formidable length of gray lined with purple satin, or purple lined with gray satin—whichever you choose. She wound and unwound it variously about her over-slim body, with here a deft turning of an edge to show reverse color, and there releasing a length to emphasize richness of dimension. A clever young woman she was, nineteen or so, with wise eyes and a hard mouth, who spends her days exhibiting lovely clothes for other women to wear, mimicking the wealthy Parisienne or the chic New Yorker as a parakeet might ape a peacock, envying, competing, aging. The Paris mannequin is a subject apart, a unique being. You watch her and forget that you are come to choose a frock until she strolls too near and you remark a label on her skirt. The one I recall was so droll that I tell you of it. It marked a costume named "Richelleu," which had nothing of its period in its cut. The significance of the title was in a sort of tiny cape which covered so completely a daring décolletage that it was thought to suggest the character of the deceptive Cardinal. An amusing bit of Gallic esprit! Model frocks are known and ordered by their name, an easy means of distinguishing that both adds attraction and facilitates the order book. Most frequently costumes bear the names of French history—DuBarry, Malmison, Ninon de l'Enclos, but now and again a bizarre modern title tags the hem of a frock, Spring Showers, or Martini.

Perhaps you are fortunate enough to be entertained at a soiree given by M. and Madame Poiret (which the journalists name the "Fetes of the Thousand and One Nights") when not a trace of the business of dressing women remains to suggest the daytime use of the several salons of the first floor. Rose-colored walls painted with French blue and mauve stripes and occasionally a scattered pink rose, deep rose red taffeta hangings at the many long windows which open on the gardens, painted wooden chairs in grays and mauves that seat customers by day but charmingly receive guests after dusk, frequent mirrors, doors of glass and a great hall through which a white marble staircase balustraded with wrought iron winds into the unknown, and at the end of the hall an inconceivably large mirror in which, against it, is reflected a seat of black velvet spread with cushions that Aladdin might have envied for his personal palace and that afford a splendid note of contrasting color to the still more splendid decorations added for the evening, and the brilliant group of assembled guests among whom M. and Madame Poiret are never lost to view, so arresting is each of their personalities—this is the Maison of Poiret, in sunlight and electricity, by day a salesroom, at night a salon.

PAUL POIRET is never interviewed. You may know him socially, or, if you are a very admired customer, you may obtain his decree upon your sartorial needs, a rare occurrence nowadays, since he is so much a man of other affairs that merely designing clothes is incidental, otherwise you will not meet him. He is a handsome man, with high cheek bones and long, heavy-lidded eyes that suggest Oriental origin; short, just a bit heavy, but with it a high vitality that lifts him physically as well as mentally above many a taller man; contradictory hands, both long of finger and square of palm; chic, rather English clothes that pleasantly seem not so new as very well pressed, and direct interrogative eyes.

The portrait reproduced here of Monsieur and Madame Poiret, which has just been painted by Garcia Benito and which now hangs in the new salon at the Grand Palais, gives you the impression of the chic boulevardier that Poiret might be if he wasn't so much more the creative artist, the man of decorative affairs and enterprises. And Madame Poiret as well gains nothing from Benito's paint. To be sure her frock of gold tissue is dexterously reproduced and her brilliant, compact head is well suggested, but she is far prettier than her picture. She is,



however, a subtly matching personality to the husband at her right hand. You might imagine them to be brother and sister from Benito's seeing of them if you didn't know them to be husband and wife.

But enough of the Poiret personality. There are so many other things to talk about—Poiret as an interior decorator, whom we have already met in his own establishment; Poiret as a perfumer; Poiret as the manager of a night restaurant, just opened and named "Le Clover"; Poiret as an organizer of the annual spring fete at Cannes; as stage costumer; Poiret in a dozen activities that are rapidly writing figures to the left of the decimal point in the addition of his fortune. It is easy to say that he must have been born under that lucky star that no astronomer has ever been able to place, although it appears now and again to light the birthright of a favorite child, but it is more truthful to say that he has made his own way brilliant by the constant expression of an indefatigable individuality. The gift of the casual appears to be his, but it is wrapped about with stupendous energy.

His interest in perfumes shows the activity of his brain even in play. He commenced to experiment with them entirely as a relaxation. But his success in extracting the essence of nature herself forbade the closing of his laboratory until at the moment it has become an industry that employs many people and finds outlet in a shop named "Rosine" that is niched in beside the Faubourg Saint Honore entrance of the Poiret "Hotel." It is a humorous little boutique full of quaint bottles and boxes that imprison such perfumes as "Monsieur et Madame" and "Mae Culpa." One often blames a

perfume for one weakness or another, but whoever thought of labeling it so before Poiret called it "Mae Culpa."

Poiret has recently shown that he has a humorous slant in his decorative vision in a restaurant that opened a week before this was written and for which he is sponsor as decorator, and one imagines from which he must draw a considerable revenue. "Le Clover," in the Rue Caumartin, has been both club and theatre. Under Poiret ownership it opens at 11 in the evening and closes when you are ready to breakfast—a night restaurant. I went to see it. I entered through portal hangings that seemed too stunning to be subjected to the whim of Paris weather and along a corridor mysterious with exotic fabric and fabrication. The usual night restaurant has only a few mirrors to decorate it and depends on the beauty of the women who frequent it and the bouquet of its wines to suggest an attractive midnight milieu. Not so "Le Clover." Every inch of it is of distinctive decoration, and although Irene Hammond and "Charlie" Stuart dance there each night, you return to enjoy the spectacular effect of the place rather than the women or the dancers, or even to dance yourself.

APPROPOS, Poiret has caused to be painted in behind the musicians' stand a score or more of black faces so scarlet of lip and white of rolling eye that they must rather disconcert the orchestra if it turns to inspect its mural background. And the smiling spectator doesn't know which is which, black flesh or black fresco. At one end of the restaurant a night sky is painted with immense white clouds and a golden

star or two, and on the opposite wall, which backs a wide alcove, a garden is latticed with roses and hung with brilliant crystal lights to afford sharp and enticing contrast for choosing one's table to accord with one's mood of display or discretion.

And in the shop, a place in which to sell, but nevertheless furnished as an apartment (you may buy anything you choose in this Poiret dwelling if you have the "price"), in this shop Poiret shows the creations of a group of young people known as the School Martine, pupils obviously, although they are said to express only their individual observations of nature in design, but the resulting decorations are of the sort with which Poiret revolutionized the upholstery and textile manufacturing six or eight years ago. They are in fact Poiret himself, first color in large surfaces, juxtaposed and unfriendly stripes, merry spottings, quaint foliage and birds that were once thought "queer." Black and gold are the compelling tones of the shop Martine.

It is Paul Poiret's intelligent habit to live for a time each year in a country that is new to him. He studies it, assimilates its arts in motif and color melody, and returns to Paris to give the world a textile memoir of his wanderings. It is neither imitation nor challenge. It is rather an almost superhuman understanding of beauty. Many writers have tried to explain beauty. Euripides, Keats, a few have succeeded, as much by sound as by definition. Many painters have tried to show it. Again a few have succeeded, Botticelli, Holms, Gauguin. Poiret, in his directions and within the limitations of his century, is an artist among these men.

Paul Poiret, a being of tremendous driving force and a remarkable artist